In 1990 Bob May embarked on a project that he had dreamed about since he was a boy. His efforts have resulted in the only currently flying Mustang in Canadian markings. Photography by **Paul Bowen**.

O Canada!

Bob and Judy May with Bob Odegaard relax after the Warbird Digest photo mission.

In late 1950, twenty-five P-51 Mustangs were delivered to Uruguay. This delivery was the result of very thorough planning on the part of the leaders of the Fuerza Aérea Uruguaya (FAU). The FAU was originally slated to receive P-47D Thunderbolts as early as 1946. These were to be supplied under the American Republic Project, the predecessor of the Military Assistance Program. They turned down these essentially free fighters in favor of a future purchase of Mustangs they would have to pay for. In 1948 the leaders of the FAU with the assistance of U.S. military advisors developed a plan to obtain Mustangs and B-25 Mitchells to equip a fighter group and bomber group respectively.

In 1949 thirty-five pilots and technicians were sent to the United States to form the core of the fighter group. When the deliveries began in November 1950, the twenty-five aircraft were serialed FAU 252 to FAU 274. Although Uruguay would operate the P-51 until 1960, it would not be an altogether pleasant experience. There was a reason why the U.S. had offered P-47s to the vast majority of Latin American countries. Most of those air arms had previous experience maintaining aircraft with radial engines and there was concern that the liquid systems in the Mustang would cause serviceability issues. This, combined with the lack of spare parts as the result of the Korean War, would at times reduce the number of combat ready aircraft to as low as six. By 1960, the Mustangs were struck off charge by the FAU. Eight of the best airframes were sold to Bolivia and the remaining were scrapped, save two, FAU 265 and FAU 274 which were saved for display. Both of those aircraft were returned to the United States in 1984. That would have been the end of the Uruguayan Mustang story if not for Canadian Bob May.

May grew up on a farm in Manitoba not far from Carberry, where the Royal Canadian Air Force was storing their remaining Mustang inventory. He stumbled across the airplanes while

helping his father run the family farm. May picks up the story. "Back in the mid-sixties when I was a teenager, probably 14 or 15 years old, the government had stored the surplus Mustangs of the RCAF Winnipeg Reserve Squadron out at Carberry, which was about 20 miles from where I lived. They were going to close the airport and make it into a potato processing plant. My Dad sent my brothers and me down to pick up some bricks and shingles that they were selling surplus. Every time my Dad turned his back I was off down the hangar line looking at the Mustangs that they had dragged out. There were about fifteen of them, if I recall. They were lined up there and they were so worthless at the time that Simplot, out of Idaho, who were trying to turn the whole airport into the processing plant, threatened to bulldoze them out of the way if the people that bought them didn't get them out of there. These were parts airplanes, and they had magnetos, switches, and this and that missing. The guys that had bought them were busy trying to get them flying so they could move them. As the years went by, I learned that a lot of those airplanes were the survivors that went to the States and are still flying today."

"Anyway, that was this farm kids first chance to get up close to an airplane. Since this was my first real aviation experience, I think I just thought that all airplanes were supposed to look like P-51s. From that point on I had kind of thing for Mustangs and aviation in general." May even tried to convince his Dad to buy one of the Carberry Mustangs. "I remember saying at the time, 'Geez Dad, we should buy one of these. He said, 'nah those old warplanes aren't worth anything.' He is long gone, now, but I was back on the farm one day and as I was walking I stumbled over this bump. I kicked grass and there was the pile of bricks he had us bring home from Carberry. He had never used them and they were still laying there!"

▲ (top) The line-up of ex-RCAF Mustangs at Carberry.
Photo: Dick Philips Collection.

▲ (middle) FAU 252 in storage in Uruguay while May went through the legal process to obtain the right to ship the airplane.

Shortly after being recovered FAU 252 basks in the sun on the shore of the Rio Negro.

▲ (top) The beginning of the wing in Odegaard Aviation's jig.

▲ (middle) The two wings are mated and prepared for the installation of the fuel tanks.

May decided to pursue an aviation career, starting out by flying in the bush planes in the northern territories of Canada. He then tried the airline business, but didn't find that he enjoyed it. Eventually he would obtain a license to operate a business in the arctic and formed Keewatin Air. Early on they operated aircraft such as deHavilland Beavers and Cessna 185s into back country airstrips. In recent years Keewatin has operated turbo props such as the Pilatus PC-12 and King Air 200. May was never able to get the Mustang out of his blood. "Every few years I would check and find out that they weren't 500 dollars anymore they were $25,000 then $125,000 and so on. It was always just out of reach. Five hundred dollars was just as much out of the question when I was fifteen than $25,000 when I was twenty-five. I decided, 'Well if I am going to have a Mustang I guess I better start putting one together.' I started back in about 1990 buying parts, going through Trade-A-Plane and getting on the phone and calling people and looking for pieces. Eventually I heard about a guy in the States who had a Mustang project for sale."

May made contact with Californian Rocky Medina who had located a Mustang that might be possible to recover in Uruguay. On August 8, 1956 FAU 252 USAAF Serial No. 44-63476 was lost in the Rio Negro River while on a training mission. The young pilot, Jorge E. Thomasset was killed. "I called Rocky Medina and for the next four years we were pretty much joined at hip. He had actually learned about the airplane in a book about Latin American Mustangs. The book had the identities a bit off, but Rocky had gone down there and gotten salvage rights, but hadn't found anything yet. I went down to Los Angeles and we struck a deal. As Rocky explained it, getting the rights to perform the recover took quite a while. I would later learn first hand that when you are dealing with the Uruguayans you had to have a lot of time."

The big day. The wing and the fuselage are mated together.

Medina had to obtain the permission of Thomasset's widow and a number of junior FAU commanders for the recovery. As May understood it, "The widow of the young pilot had never remarried. It was sort of one of those Latin tragedies, she had just gotten married when he was killed. She was around 80 I think, when Rocky spoke to her , and she was still in love with a young Lieutenant., but she decided that it would be okay to salvage this thing."

The area where the crash took place was range land, with a large man made lake created by a hydro-electric dam in the Rio Negro. In the middle of the lake, about ¾ mile from shore was an island. The FAU had placed targets on the island and it was used for bombing and gunnery range. Thomasset crashed into the lake while on a practice bombing mission. According to May, "I guess the accident occurred because the guy had like 40 hours total time. It was his first day out practicing dropping bombs. They had little practice bombs on the airplane. It was a gray day and the water was flat and glassy. He didn't recognize the danger and flew it into the surface of the water."

On his trips to Uruguay, Medina located a woman who had been a young girl when FAU 252 crashed. She was convinced she knew the exact location of the crash-site. May and Medina started their search there. May was confident it would be a quick recovery so he went to Uruguay in 1991, "We were so sure that it was only going to be a matter of a few days of looking around out there, that my wife and family went down to witness all the events. Well, it didn't quite turn out that way. It would take additional trips and another year before we found the airplane about three miles from where the eyewitness said it had crashed. The young girl's account could have been right, it may have floated away It was in about sixty feet of water."

During their 1992 expedition, Medina and May began to understand why so many airplane hunters have gone to Latin America and returned empty handed, and a lot poorer. "We were staying in a little place called Placa del la Toros, a little cow town community. That meant place of the bulls or something along those lines, but my kids called it the place of lost tourists because we were the only ones there. Of course being a couple of Canadians, staying in the best hotel in town, which my recollection was three dollars a night, with a screen door on it, the people, who were very gracious became very curious about what was going on. The local equivalent of the Communist party, which was like Greenpeace and everything else all rolled into one, decided that what must be going on was that the government must be considering placing a nuclear power plant in the area around the lake. Somebody snuck into the area and peeked into our tents and saw our side scan sonar and magnetometer equipment. They didn't know what it was, but it was hi-tech equipment, so they thought it verified their story of what was going on. The next thing we know we have demonstrations going on out there and the press came to find out what was going on. We kept telling them we were just looking for an old airplane in a lake. They were quite sure that we were out there checking the depth of the lake to see if they could meet the proper cooling requirements for a nuclear plant."

Suddenly, senior members of the FAU and the national museum were being questioned by the press. The embarrassed officers were forced to take action to save face according to May. "The FAU really didn't want the airplane. They weren't proud of the fact that it had crashed and they hadn't had a whole lot of luck with the Mustang. However, since the issue had been raised that someone was stealing a national treasure, they had to do something. They didn't seize the airplane, but

▼(middle) Bob May bound this Merlin engine in storage in Quebec. It was photographed shortly after he obtained it and before it was overhauled by Dwight Thorne's Mystery Aire. This is proof positive that parts of World War Two airplanes are still squirreled away around the world.

we were forced to go through their process, which involved suing the FAU and the government. Instead of putting the thing in a container and taking it home, we spent another two years suing the air force. It wasn't expensive or confrontational, it was just their process. They actually told us exactly how to do it. Rocky had to go down there and register the suit in each province; we couldn't do it by mail. What it amounted to was that we sued them for what we estimated was the cost of the salvage operation, and since they didn't want to pay it, they awarded us the aircraft. It was very time consuming."

Finally, in late 1994 May was able to ship the remains of FAU 252 home. Unfortunately, the wreck was not in as good of shape as initially expected. While the wreck had been submerged in fresh water, it was badly corroded. Those portions of the airframe that had been sitting in the mud were factory fresh. The green zinc chromate was intact and the ink stamped part numbers were readable. The sections that were exposed to the flowing water were severely corroded, in many cases completely through the structure. While disappointed with the condition of the airframe, May wasn't willing to leave empty handed. "Before we started we had the water tested to see what we might find down there and the water was quite neutral. I think the problem was that there was a power dam a few miles down the lake, so the water was continually flowing, and the wreck was always oxidizing. If it had been stagnant neutral water I think it would have been pretty well preserved. When you are on a mission like this, what you haul up on the end of the rope is what you get, and whether you leave it there or not is your decision. We decided to bring it home. Surprisingly we did get some good stuff out of it."

May had the wreckage shipped to Gerry Beck's Tri-State Aviation in Wahpeton, North Dakota. At Tri-State it was

▲May's Harvard Mk. IV CCF4-196 RCAF 20405 recently arrived in Wahpeton for restoration.

▲The cockpit restoration and detailing was performed by Midwest Aero Restorations. These stock cockpits have become a signature of the company.

disassembled and the various brackets and fittings that could be reused were removed. During the time that the Uruguayan recovery was underway, May continued his effort to locate parts. "I had been busy scrounging away, and the guys used to chuckle at my scrounging, but it was kind of my rest and relaxation. Whenever I had few spare minutes I would get on the phone and see what I could find around." These efforts paid off when he found an intact tail cone in a barn in Winnipeg, no less. This too was sent to North Dakota where it was rebuilt. Once the parts from FAU 252 arrived a fuselage was built up and mated to the tail cone. Bob Odegaard built a wing using all the castings and brackets from the wreckage.

Once the fuselage was together it was sent to Mike Vadeboncoeur at Midwest Aero Restorations in Danville, Illinois for all the detail work. "The guys were real busy in Wahpeton and at the time they hadn't done much of detail work, they were busy building subassemblies. Midwest had it for about a year and a half or two years and they puttered away as they found the parts etc." Once the fuselage was completely detailed, it was returned to Tri-State for final assembly and systems installation. An engine was located in Quebec and overhauled by Dwight Thorne. The goal for the restoration was authenticity, unless it compromised safety. One of the few concessions to the stock configuration was the addition of a second seat. As May says, "I guess a purist would say that it isn't original, but I can't imagine having an airplane like this and not be able to take somebody for a ride."

May was now faced with the difficult decision of which paint scheme to use. "I looked at doing an American scheme because I couldn't find too many P-51Ds that had been flown by Canadians that had interesting paint schemes from the war. I kept coming back to when I was a kid and ran across the Carberry Mustangs in their Reserve Squadron colors. One day I went into a hobby shop that is run by an old RCAF guy. I was standing there talking about the Mustang project and another gentleman walked in and thought we were talking about a model. The proprietor said, no, he is building a real Mustang and the customer stated that he had a color slide of a City of Winnipeg squadron Mustang. He brought the slide and I thought, there is nothing outstanding about one airplane or another from the squadron, so I decided to paint it exactly like it." Tri-State was asked to paint the aircraft as they completed it. The slide obtained at the hobby shop was blown up and all the details were recorded. Paint masks were made and all stencils and insignia were painted on.

Fifteen years after the quest to build a Mustang began; Bob Odegaard flew "City of Winnipeg" in August 2004. In February 2005, May's wife, Judy surprised him by having the aircraft flown to Canada for his 60th birthday. The airplane continues to reside in Wahpeton. May recently sold Keewatin Air which now allows him to spend more time enjoying his passion for flight and less time running a business. He recently purchased a Harvard IV project that had been sitting in a barn in Nebraska since the late 1960s. This too, will be restored to May's exacting standards.

The restoration of 'City of Winnipeg' is a testimony to the combined efforts of Tri-State Aviation, Odegaard Aviation, and Midwest Aero Restorations. "I can't say enough about the guys down in North Dakota. They are kind of the best kept secret. One of the reasons that I enjoyed this project so much was that I would go down there to see what was happening with the project and wander around to see what else they were doing down there. They are low keyed, but smart guys, which do amazing work. Maybe the reason I got the Harvard was to have an excuse to keep going down there."